

# Aristophanes and Athens

## Sheet 4:

### Aristophanes' *Acharnians*

Relevant syllabuses: AQA Classical Civilisation AS CIV1c, Advanced Higher Classical Studies Section 4, Advanced Higher Classical Greek Interpretation: War (lines 496-625).

#### 1. Key Questions

Recent exam and assessment questions have included:

'To what extent, in your opinion, did Aristophanes aim in the *Acharnians* to make his audience think as well as laugh? Support your answer with references to the text.' (AH Greek 2014)

'In these lines Dikaiopolis gives an account of how the war came about. Is this really his own account and how seriously is this account to be taken? Support your answer with reference to the text.' (AH Greek 2014)

'How important to the themes and humour of *The Acharnians* are Dikaiopolis' confrontations with Lamachus? Give the reasons for your views and support them with details from the play. You might include discussion of:

- the points in the play when these confrontations occur
  - the contrasts Aristophanes makes between Dikaiopolis and Lamachus
  - how realistic Aristophanes' portrayal of Lamachus is likely to be
  - how far these scenes support the main themes of the play and any serious message it may have the range of humour in these scenes.'
- (AQA AS Classical Civilisation January 2013)

The first question is asking candidates to consider the extent to which *Acharnians* may be seen as a 'serious' comedy. The second question reflects on the various identities taken up by Dikaiopolis throughout the play. The third question invites discussion of the theme of war vs. peace, whilst the guiding notes again call for a consideration of the play's seriousness. These are all points debated by scholars, and this sheet will outline some of the academic responses to these questions.

#### 2. *Acharnians* as a 'Serious' Comedy?

"DIKAIOPOLIS: What I am going to say may be unpalatable, but it's the truth."<sup>1</sup>

"*Acharnians* has become the focus of intense critical disagreement: it is difficult to interpret in itself and its form and content make it the text most often referred to in more general arguments over the extent to which Aristophanic comedy had a 'serious' political role to play in the Athenian democracy."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Aristophanes, *Acharnians* 501 (trans. Sommerstein 2002, p.33).

<sup>2</sup> Hesk (2000) 258f.

“**LEADER:** And then he [the Persian King] asked [the Spartans’ embassy] about this poet [i.e. Aristophanes]: ‘Would you say his mind/ To speak harsh words of Athens or of you was more inclined? He makes much better people of whoever he reviles;/ If they keep him as adviser, they will win the war by miles.’”<sup>3</sup>

At a number of points throughout the play, Dicaeopolis claims to be speaking the truth, or what is right (*to dikaion*), about the Peloponnesian War and the need to end it. Although we aren’t introduced to Dicaeopolis’ name until line 406, and although its meaning is not precisely clear, the name itself hints at such purpose. Dicaeopolis (*Dikaio-polis*) can mean ‘Just City’ or perhaps ‘Just Citizen’. The question then becomes this: is Dicaeopolis making a serious point in claiming to speak what is right or is Greek comedy only ever to be regarded as light entertainment? The scholarship is divided on this question.

Whilst accepting that “the means of fulfilment are inevitably abnormal and superhuman”, Paul Cartledge considers Aristophanes’ fantastical plot an “‘if-only’ type of fantasy” made realistic by the inclusion of contemporary realities – the setting of the Assembly, the presence of embassies from Thrace and Persia, and so on. Indeed, he even seems to suggest that Aristophanes was a Spartan sympathiser: “the line that this is drama and carnival drama at that begins to wear pretty thin. What Aristophanes is advocating... is not just peace for its own sake, but a peace from which Sparta mainly would profit.”<sup>4</sup> Douglas MacDowell, meanwhile, emphasises that Dicaeopolis’ defence speech is one among several serious moments within the play: “however frivolous comedy may be, there are some occasions when it says something serious and true, and this speech is going to be one of them.”<sup>5</sup> He also sees the representation of the Megarians as pathetic, and not at all humorous.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, his conclusion is that “Aristophanes wants the spectators to enjoy watching Dikaipolis’ fantastic pleasures, but also to be convinced that he has right on his side and that the pursuit of the Peloponnesian War is a mistake.”<sup>7</sup>

Conversely, Stephen Halliwell argues that Old Comedy is not exclusively or even primarily concerned with contemporary events; topicality’s “importance should certainly not be exaggerated, and it is not nearly prevalent enough to support the idea that the airing and amplification of current publicity was central to comedy’s purposes.”<sup>8</sup> Again, he notes that the situations presented in *Acharnians* are not only humorous, but ridiculous; “no Athenian soldier could with impunity have publicly belittled an Athenian general as Dicaeopolis does Lamachus... At such moments, and in the larger scenarios to which they belong, an audience is offered an opportunity to derive pleasure from the reckless ‘shamelessness’ of the characters, i.e. their total disregard for the constraints of social decency in language and action.”<sup>9</sup> This point is not wildly different from Cartledge’s understanding of Greek comedy as ‘wish fulfilment’, but the key contrast is that for Halliwell, the comedy is firmly rooted in an absurd, unattainable wish, a wish the audience knows will never happen.

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<sup>3</sup> Aristophanes, *Acharnians* 647-652 (trans. Sommerstein 2002, pp.38-9).

<sup>4</sup> Cartledge (1990) 54-8.

<sup>5</sup> MacDowell (1993) 148f.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 157f.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 160.

<sup>8</sup> Halliwell (1993) 335.

<sup>9</sup> Halliwell (2014) 195.

In turn, Goldhill sees this entire debate as a symptom of the playwright's particular comic vision, as a question he actively invites us to ponder; "how far, how serious, how comic, how literal, how applicable to me, to us, to them, to you are questions that Aristophanes' writing constantly poses for its readers and audiences".<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Costumes and Disguise

"DIKAIOPOLIS: The audience have got to know who I am, but the Chorus have got to be fooled"<sup>11</sup>

From the very start of the play, when Dicaeopolis starts talking about good and bad tragic and musical performances as he waits on the Pnyx, *Acharnians* draws a connection between politics and theatre. The ambassadors sent to Persia are dressed in elaborate Persian costumes and the King's Eye is dressed literally as an eye! The Persian eunuchs are revealed to be Cleisthenes and Strato dressed up.<sup>12</sup> It is therefore entirely fitting that, when about to deliver his defence speech, Dicaeopolis also dons a theatrical costume. The costume of Telephus is particularly apt because "the disguise of a tragic figure (himself in disguise) who defends the Trojans to the Greeks befits the situation of Dicaeopolis as a citizen who is trying to defend his sympathy for his audience's enemy in the face of their hostility."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the connections to Euripides' *Telephus* run throughout the play, including in the parodic hostage scene. However, as Hesk notes, "it is crucial to understand that Dicaeopolis' defence speech engages in parody of the *Telephus*. But that parody is itself a means of parodying three other forms of democratic performance: forensic defence and procedure, deliberative oratory in the *ecclesia* and the specific scenario of a comic playwright justifying his comedy's content in the face of political and legal censure."<sup>14</sup> Specifically, defendants would often attempt to make themselves or their family seem pitiful in Athenian lawcourts.

Helena Foley argues that the voice of tragedy is adopted in *Acharnians* to legitimise Aristophanes' (serious) criticism of the state; "through its imitation of serious literature, comedy makes its political satire seem comparable to what audiences traditionally accepted from tragic poets like Euripides simply because they cloaked their iconoclastic message with myth and an elevated style."<sup>15</sup> She further argues that the play exposes and undermines tragic-dramatic conventions such as the stage *machina* and the costume.<sup>16</sup> However, for Goldhill, the absurd layering of costumes and identities (Dicaeopolis/Aristophanes/Telephus etc.) undermines any possibility of clearly pinning down the protagonist's fluid identity and attaching it to one serious point of view.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Goldhill (1991) 194.

<sup>11</sup> Aristophanes, *Acharnians* 442 (trans. Sommerstein 2002, p.69).

<sup>12</sup> Cleisthenes was a real public figure and a constant target of Old Comic poets' abusive jokes. They mocked him for his effeminacy and military cowardice. Nothing is known about Strato, except that, like Cleisthenes, he was beardless. The two are paired together again in a line of Aristophanes' *Knights*.

<sup>13</sup> Hesk (2000) 265.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 263.

<sup>15</sup> Foley (1988) 40.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 43f.

<sup>17</sup> Goldhill (1991) 193.

For Hesk, Dicaeopolis' playing with costume and rhetorical trickery creates a certain tension, because "his claim that country folk can be hoodwinked by 'unjust' oratory raises the question of how far Dicaeopolis' speech will be different from the deceptive and 'unjust' [trickery] which was exposed in the opening scene" in which Dicaeopolis systematically cut through the ambassadors', Persians' and Thracians' verbal and aesthetic deceits.<sup>18</sup> "The implication that Dicaeopolis has adopted the unscrupulous rhetorical techniques of the younger generation must lead the audience to question whether his claim to speak 'justice' should be believed," he concludes.<sup>19</sup> By the very fact that he claims to be revealing the truth about aggrandising orators, Aristophanes/Dicaeopolis is himself enacting the typical rhetorical performance of a self-aggrandising orator.

#### 4. Private Peace and Public War

**"DIKAIOPOLIS:** Should you be hung-over tomorrow, drink some peace and you'll soon be all right!/ The shield that I bore in my battles will be hanging up over the fire."<sup>20</sup>

The theme of peace and war is central to *The Acharnians*. It is most clearly delineated in the scenes where Lamachus the general confronts Dicaeopolis for setting up a private peace. In his opening speech Dicaeopolis laments the assembly's refusal to discuss peace.<sup>21</sup> And throughout, at least within the context of the play, it is clear that peace is the preferred option.

There has been some scholarly debate over whether Dicaeopolis' private peace is inherently selfish. Foley argues that "Dikaiopolis deliberately engages in treason, and does so for purely selfish gain".<sup>22</sup> Conversely, MacDowell argues that "certainly [Dicaeopolis] enjoys himself, but he does not wish to prevent other people from enjoying themselves too. In the early part of the play it is made quite clear that he wants the Ekklesia [Assembly] to make peace for Athens as a whole, and it is not until that has been found impossible that he takes steps to make a private peace."<sup>23</sup> Dicaeopolis, he notes, excludes only Lamachus from his market.

Throughout the play, there is a clear connection drawn between peace, wine, food and sex. In the market scene, the starving Megarians have been emaciated by the continuing war. And Lamachus readies himself for war, Dicaeopolis marks his new-found peace by preparing himself a feast. Amphitheus puns on the word '*spondai*' - this means 'peace treaties' and 'libations'. In Greek religion you typically used wine to make libations to the gods. And while peace treaties were confirmed through the making of such libations, the scene at lines 186-203 exploits the comic potential of wine's various associations with peace; Amphitheus offers Dicaeopolis various vintages of wine to try but the joke is that these are also various durations of peace treaty. In the final scene, Dicaeopolis, at peace, feasts and entertains prostitutes whilst Lamachus laments over his wound.

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<sup>18</sup> Hesk (2000) 263.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 268f.

<sup>20</sup> Aristophanes, *Acharnians* 277-9 (trans. Sommerstein 2002, p.61)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p.50.

<sup>22</sup> Foley (1988) 38.

<sup>23</sup> MacDowell (1983) 158.

## 5. Final Thoughts and Questions

The question of how far Dicaeopolis' private peace is meant to be viewed as selfish by the Athenian audience may seem to matter a great deal. But we also have to reckon with Halliwell's argument that Dikaepolis' shamelessness is not meant to be taken seriously or evaluated in relation to real values and events. On that reading, the pleasure and humour to be derived from the play are rooted firmly in the fact that both Dikaepolis and the 'voice' of Aristophanes articulate and enact what would be unthinkable and outrageous in real life, and at this point in the Peloponnesian War. It is precisely their transgressive, shameless, self-aggrandizing behaviour which is so enjoyable and funny and any attempt to take them as embodiments of serious advice or coherent 'satire' would be to miss the point of the joke.

This is not to say that *Acharnians* does not remind the audience of the benefits of peace and the costs of war. Nor should we entirely dismiss arguments (e.g. in the work of MacDowell and Hesk) to the effect that the comedy asks its audience to see things from the non-Athenian point of view and reflect on their own past decision-making and its vulnerabilities to rhetoric. But that is very different from saying that the play is a 'serious' call for peace or a coherent attack on those who wanted to continue the war.

**Over to you now. What parts of the text would you use to support or question these different strands of argument and interpretation? How might they be taken further?**

## Bibliography

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